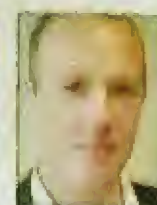


Gypsy meets villager... and they



The anticipated clash between gypsy leader Cliff Codrington and Cottenham parish council chair Paula Johnson ended in a polite and positive tea party.

Photograph by David Brown



The battle between residents and travellers has been likened to civil war, but when **Euan Ferguson** got the two sides together the differences melted away. So why is everyone so angry about the issue?

PREJUDICE makes life so much simpler, don't you find? Reactionary prejudices, liberal prejudices. We know just where we're coming from, and for a while the world seems a little more manageable. Then you come across the gypsies.

Here, for instance, are some of my own last reactions this past week. On reading a quote from Wiltshire North Tory MP James Gray on the explosion of gypsies and travelling people in England: 'Now is the time for us to be tough. There are tens of thousands of people in caravans in Italy and Romania who are watching how we deal with the situation. If we are soft on it, they will be coming.' I laugh, as you

would with any pronouncement which sounds like the blurb for a Fifties B-flick.

When I put down the phone on a prominent member of a rich village community who has just told me, solemnly, 'I won't sit down with Pikey', I wonder both what it is about the absence of the indefinite article which renders the epithet so much more dislikeable, and why it is these days in rural England that the phrase 'prominent in the community' heralds less a token of respect than a shiver of foreboding.

And then, later that night, in the dark and rain, as I try to find the nice gypsy people to hear their woes, I am chased back through barbed wire and mud by a pack of bad yellow dogs being egged on by filthy, unhelpful children and find myself thinking 'reckless gypsy scum'.

Next morning, walking the banks of the Thames by Pangbourne in Berkshire, where Kenneth Grahame set *Wind in the Willows*, it was possible to be dismissive of the irritating prettiness of the houses and yet think, well, if that was my irritatingly pretty home then, with the best liberal credentials in the world, I still wouldn't be happy to open its curtains every morning and see, instead of an irritatingly pretty waterbank, a thumbingly ugly rusted skip.

You can see the problem. I was changing irrational prejudices faster than a Home Secretary Butler, perhaps, to try to get the two sides together, for once, away from lazy media sniping between the people who hate gypsies and the people who hate the people who hate gypsies, and find out what's going wrong.

This getting-together was easier thought than done. In the past year or so, tensions between rural residents and travellers (Romanian gypsies, Irish-Scots travellers and a handful of New Agers) have come close to meltdown at a dozen sites in England.

No gypsies signs are going up in pubs in Essex. Last month an 18-year-old girl was thrown off a bus in Sandy, Bedfordshire, just for being a gypsy. Trevor Phillips of the Commission for Racial Equality has compared their plight to that of black folk in the Deep South of the US 40 years ago.

In 1964 the Tory government removed the duty on

local councils to provide sites for travellers. At around the same time, parking their trailers on verges and other public places became not a civil but a criminal offence.

There are an estimated 300,000 members of the travelling community in Britain, over 90 per cent of them with legal homes and businesses. The frontages of our seaside towns would be empty without them, and about 6,000 living legally on the remaining 324 official (and now almost fully council) sites.

But for the last decade there has been an increasing number, recently estimated by a Commons select committee as 3,500 and growing, without anywhere to legally stop – and consequently they have now been openly, unapologetically, buying green field space with their own money, exploiting planning loopholes dodging last minute applications over bank holiday week-ends and the like, and having their trailer legs sunk in concrete before the relevant council has had time to face its bureaucratic bores: all of which has, of course, royally infuriated the rich residents of pretty villages.

Add a substantial increase of unbridled scaremongering, in which gypsies are afforded similar treatment to asylum seekers, and a pledge by Michael Howard to fiddle with the Human Rights Act to stop gypsies 'abusing' it, and you can see much is in place for a new English civil war.

YET WHEN *The Observer* does manage to get the two sides together, in Cottenham in Cambridgeshire, the common ground is astonishing enough to have the most rampant rabid anti-stirrers and wildest libels grinding teeth at the back of spurs.

Cliff Codrington of the National Travellers' Action Group can remember every sub-section of every piece of planning legislation enacted in his lifetime relating to gypsies. He has to remember: he is happy to confess he can't read or write. Paula Johnson is the chair of Cottenham Parish Council, which has been at the centre of one of the most bitter disputes of the past year, since 60 travellers arrived unexpectedly on a local site. The Cottenham site has been used by gypsies for the past 40 years, in general with quiet tolerance from the